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The Editor as Archeologist*

Stephen Maxfield Parrish

When a major collection of rare books and manuscripts is presented to a major research library, it is fitting not only to celebrate the occasion, but to remind ourselves how much we owe to the people who put collections like this together over the years. Book collectors are a rare and wonderful breed. Fanatically discriminating, as they must be to sort out dross from treasure, they often seem fanatically indiscriminating in the way they heap up unconsidered trifles—discarded scraps of writing, a poet's rejected drafts, his casual letters, bits of his journals, his butcher's bills (when he was fortunate enough to eat meat—Shelley preferred to survive on bread and lettuce, and Wordsworth lived for long periods of time on vegetables, and tea without sugar.)

I should like to make the point that to both kinds of the fanaticism that drives collectors, we scholars and critics, hence the whole world of humane readers, owe an incalculable debt. For it is collectors—both private collectors and those who staff institutional libraries—who today serve the function of the monasteries in the Middle Ages, gathering and keeping safe the records, the achievements, of a civilization. Were they less fanatical, our debt would be the less. Consider the unaccountable behavior of Henry Folger, who set out to acquire copy after copy of the same book, the First Folio of Shakespeare, and who left seventy of these priceless volumes in the library he founded in Washington. Whatever his motive, he could hardly have foreseen the way in which this hoard of seventy volumes made possible one of the most ingenious, and fascinating, achievements of modern scholarship, the reconstruction of the printing of the Folio conducted by the late Kadi Hinman, who invented a machine to help him compare what were supposed to be identical pages in copy after copy. (You can imagine what this procedure might have been like without electromechanical help, if you reckon how long it takes to read letter by letter through a pair of large two-column pages, and then calculate the cost in years of making 70-factorial such comparisons!) The comparisons disclosed not only that printing of

the volume had been periodically interrupted in order to reset type to correct errors caught in proof—caught by reading through one of the first sheets printed while the press continued to work—but that the order of typesetting was not straightforward (page 1, followed by page 2, page 3, and so on) but by formes, a frame of pages: the compositor started with page 6 in the forme, then went back to page 5, to page 7, followed by page 4, and so on.

Setting by formes required that the copy be marked into sections so that the compositor would know precisely where page 6 began and where page 5 ended. "Casting-off" copy in this way is a delicate business, extremely delicate when the printer has to mark off a manuscript, not a printed copy, and when it is done roughly, some mistakes are inevitable. As a result, the compositor setting the last page of a forme could find that he didn't have enough room left to fit in all the text on his marked copy, or not enough text to fill up the space he had left, so that he was obliged to compress or lengthen the text, one way or another, to make it fit—which explains for the first time why Hamlet breaks into prose at a soaring poetic moment (the compositor simply and ingeniously broke up the lines of verse, stretching the speech out to fill up his column), and why Cleopatra toward the end of the play makes two speeches right together (to save room, the intervening speech of another character was dropped out). Other marvellous findings followed from the identification of individual compositors in the printing house on the basis of their spelling habits, and their pattern of use of broken types from their own particular type cases, and the like—all made possible by Henry Folger's curious fanaticism.

Collecting the letters of a poet, as Hugh Peal has done with admirable assiduity, is a rather more conventional activity than heaping up duplicate copies of a printed book, but the benefits that can accrue for the scholar can be equally unpredictable. The letters of Wordsworth, for instance, have a unique value that arises from the Wordsworth family's habits of paper usage. Some years ago, John Finch, a young Cornell scholar whose early death left all Wordsworth studies poorer, made the simple but intelligent observation that the Wordsworths, over any short period of time, used the same stock of paper for writing letters and for copying out poems. The letters would be written on portions of a folio sheet, or even on the whole sheet, while the poems would be inscribed in little notebooks made up by folding and stitching together one or more sheets. When the paper in a letter, therefore, can be matched

with the paper in a notebook, the poems entered in the notebook can be roughly dated by looking at the date on the letter. This has proven to be a powerful technique in cases where no other evidence was available to help in dating a draft or a fair copy, and I can assure the librarians here that members of my editorial team will be coming along not actually to *read* these Wordsworth letters, but to inspect and record the watermarks, the countermarks, the chain lines, and the dimensions of the paper on which they are written.

Another kind of assiduity drives collectors to treasure the scraps of rejected drafting that accumulate in every poet's wastebasket. The morality of this zeal has been questioned. What right have we to pore over the very private, tentative, maiden thoughts of a fellow human being, in his letters or his journals or his working papers—thoughts that are soon supplanted, smoothed over, refined, or discarded? And not just the morality, but the rationale of this procedure has been called into question. What logical sense does it make not just to peer at these casual papers, but to put them into print and thus elevate them to the status of finished versions? This last implied reproach is directed more against the editor than against the collector, but it is clear that the two are collusive partners in a perverse conspiracy.

I can say that as an editor of Wordsworth I feel no shame, no guilt, and no qualms of logic about digging up and exhibiting in print the draft versions, the rejected variant readings, that lie buried in layer after layer underneath the final, authorized, published text of this interesting poet. This essentially archeological labor is, for Wordsworth, directed towards something more than the conventional study of the artist at work, shaping, recasting, elaborating his language, his images, his ideas, the very essence of his poem as he brings it closer and closer to the perfect finished form that matches the perfect vision he started with. That sort of study makes a kind of sense for a poet like Yeats, though the forms that Yeats finished with seldom matched the vision he started with. His manuscripts show that as he worked he altered the course of his thought, his logic, so drastically as sometimes to end up by saying precisely the reverse of what he had first set down, and this on substantial philosophical issues! And, as we know, Yeats got better and better as he aged, like good wine, or good bourbon. The Irish poet learned his trade, and the old Yeats presents us with piercing, brilliant, terrifying perceptions that seem to lie quite beyond the powers of the young apprentice. What we value, therefore, in his

manuscript archive (preserved in two Dublin libraries and in his son's home in a Dublin suburb) is the record of his development into the full maturity of his art.

But Wordsworth is another case entirely. There is something even more important to value in his poetic manuscripts, most of them preserved by the poet's family and housed now in a little stone library across the road from Dove Cottage in the north-of-England village where Wordsworth made his home. For Wordsworth, as most of us now recognize, did not get better as he aged—he got worse; and he lived a *long* time. The poems that were composed by the youthful revolutionary Romantic seem to our modern taste, at least, better than the poems composed by the ageing Victorian, the Tory humanist. What we value, therefore, in his manuscripts, is not so much the record of the growth, or decline, of his poetic art, as the underlying, crossed-out, overwritten texts that lie beneath the final versions.

One of the most perceptive comments on this unusual situation was uttered a few years ago by Jonathan Wordsworth, who has presided genially over Wordsworth studies in the Western world from his command post at the top of the tower in Exeter College, Oxford (which Hugh Peal is bound to remember): "Most great poets are known by the best versions of their works; Wordsworth is almost exclusively known by his worst." The facts that led Jonathan Wordsworth to utter his remark are plain enough, though they seem to have been faced only in the last ten or fifteen years. First, the poet Wordsworth was, underneath a hard mask—a rough face, with jaws like a crocodile, Hazlitt once observed—exquisitely sensitive, even for a poet, and he suffered the exquisite torment of the artist. He composed with great difficulty; whenever he picked up a pen, he confessed, he was seized with "an uneasiness at my stomach and side, and a dull pain about my heart." (Coleridge once pitilessly diagnosed it as a pain in the right hypochondrium.) Greedy for praise, he found the approval of his family and friends absolutely necessary before he could nerve himself up to publishing a poem, and he kept his poems by him, in manuscript, for years after their completion. The first long poem he ventured to show Coleridge drew his partner's enthusiastic praise, but the mix of small critical comments that Coleridge helpfully provided so eroded Wordsworth's confidence in the poem that he left it unpublished for forty years! The second long poem he showed to Coleridge, and the first unmistakably great poem he had written, *The Ruined Cottage*,

was left in manuscript for several years, patched into another poem called *The Pedlar*, taken out again, rewritten several times, then after some twelve more years published, with further alterations, as part of the first book of *The Excursion*. The original *Excursion* was then layered over with revisions from edition to edition and the text that the world now knows is the one that appeared in the final collection of *Poetical Works* that began to issue from the press in Wordsworth's eightieth year. Coleridge admired *Peter Bell* rather less, and Wordsworth held it unpublished for twenty years, working it through five full versions. He kept *The White Doe* by him for seven years; *The Borderers*, his long poetic drama, for more than forty; *The Waggoner* for fourteen. *Home at Grasmere*, one of the few finished sections of the work on which he had resolved to rest all his literary hopes, and the great *Prelude* remained unpublished when he died.

The second circumstance that has given us the worst, not the best, of Wordsworth is that he was a compulsive mender and patcher of his verse; he revised tirelessly all through his long life. After the age of thirty-five or forty his creative powers began slowly to fail, and his social, religious, and political orthodoxies to harden, as he sank slowly into the respectability of the laureateship and the Egotistical Sublime. As he aged, his anxieties about his poems intensified, and he kept on compulsively putting in and taking out, right to the end. And of course, as you can now foresee, the third circumstance which has assured us the worst of Wordsworth, not the best, is that Wordsworth's editors, right up to the past decade, have without exception adopted the poet's final text, underneath which lies buried the brilliant early Wordsworth, obscured from view by the crusted layers of a lifetime of revision.

This is what makes the editing of Wordsworth an archeological undertaking. It is archeology of a different kind, a rather grosser kind, from that which has to be practised by readers and critics of any text. As any veteran cryptanalyst like Kadi Hinman would be able to recognize, reading a literary text is roughly comparable to stripping the encipherment off a piece of so-called plain text so as to be able to recover its "meaning." For Wordsworth, the preliminary stripping has to be literal, not figurative. Wordsworth's habits of work were interesting, and distinctive. When he had finished composing a poem, he would have a fair copy of it written out neatly in a notebook, or on large folio sheets folded up, by the women of his household—first his sister, then his sister and his

wife, then his sister and his wife and his wife's sister, then by all of the above along with his daughter. (Toward the end, this tribe of amanuenses was joined by the daughter's husband and Wordsworth's male handyman-secretary.) Even as the fair copies, often in duplicate, were being prepared, the poet began dictating revisions and alterations, indiscriminately in one copy or the other, obliging the copyists to erase and overwrite to keep step with each other. When the copies had been revised to illegibility, a decision had to be reached. Fresh copies were commonly started, but sometimes bits of blank paper were gummed onto the old sheets with sealing wax to receive fresh revision, and occasionally a third or a fourth layer was patched on. Finally, sheets could be cut or torn into segments and the text reassembled like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, some of them still bearing the pasted-over scraps.

Lifting off the gummed-down pieces of paper to uncover the text beneath has thus had to be the first operation in our archeological program. This has proved to be an extremely delicate business. In the beginning, I confess that I used a sharp knife, and my fingernails, to slit through the blobs of sealing wax that held the paste-overs down at their corners, and sometimes along their edges. But nineteenth-century sealing wax was extraordinarily tough, almost as though it had been compounded with marauding archeologists like me in mind. As a consequence, the blobs would remain on the paper, obscuring bits of writing, and it soon became clear (especially after I clumsily sliced into text in my effort to slice off wax) that a better method had to be devised. And it soon was. Sidney Cockerell at Cambridge, a gifted rare-book and manuscript binder and restorer, managed to brew up a liquid solution of such discriminating pungency as to dissolve the sealing wax when the manuscripts were immersed in it without harming the ink on the pages. He then laid the loose paste-overs (as we have learned to call them) delicately into the margins of the notebooks at precisely the place where they had originally stood, so that we could look at the underlying text alongside the revised text that had obscured it.

One final problem still faced us. It became Wordsworth's habit, as edition after edition of his collected poems was called for, to send to the printer of a new edition a marked-up, revised copy of the last edition. This practise converted a printed book into a manuscript (causing some confusion among catalogers in libraries into which these volumes later found their way), and, as might be expected, Wordsworth learned to treat these manuscripts just the

way he treated his other manuscripts. The one which gave us particular trouble is a copy of his 1832 collected *Poetical Works* in four volumes, most of which served as printer's copy for the six-volume *Poetical Works* of 1836. (This book-manuscript is now at Wellesley College.) The edition of 1836 is the most heavily revised of all Wordsworth's collections. The reason for this surge of creative—well, at least revisionary—activity on the part of the sixty-four-year-old poet, has not been entirely clear, but I am persuaded that it is really quite simple. Coleridge, after lingering for years in a sort of posthumous life in the custody of Dr. Gillman at Highgate, died in 1834. His death released Wordsworth from the burden he had carried since the earliest years of their collaboration in *Lyrical Ballads*, when Coleridge dismissed as “ventriloquism” the dramatic techniques that represent Wordsworth's most innovative contribution to that experimental collection. Coleridge's criticisms, however tempered or tentative, always struck home, and after the appearance of *Biographia Literaria* (which Wordsworth professed not *really* to have read) Wordsworth took pains to touch up to Coleridge's taste and implied prescription all the poems that Coleridge had singled out for critical comment. Freed in 1834 by Coleridge's death, Wordsworth heavily revised almost everything he had written, this time to his own taste. He turned back in this enterprise to his earliest published pieces, and bore down most heavily on *Descriptive Sketches* (from 1793). The pages of the 1832 volume that contain this poem present us with an intimidating mess. Lines of the poem's printed text, from beginning to end, are heavily inked over, crossed out, even partially erased (that is, portions of print are selectively scraped away), and finally gummed over with pasted-on scraps bearing the final revisions. It is a marvel that Wordsworth's printers managed to cope with copy of this sort but we know they did cope from the marks they left on the volume, and from the compositors' names inscribed periodically in the margins, making up a little company of mute, inglorious, unsung heroes of the printing fraternity.

If the volumes I have described present a unique editorial problem, the solution is, after all, only mechanical, or physical. Far greater is the challenge presented by manuscripts in which the various layers of revision are entered right on the leaves, on top of or alongside the earlier readings. It is difficult enough to deal with a palimpsest, which is what Wordsworth turned many of his texts into—a text that has been imperfectly erased and partially covered

up with fresh work and deletion marks, so that the blacked-out and scored-over readings have to be painstakingly deciphered with the help of strong light and magnifying lenses. But even greater difficulties arise from a manuscript that served over a span of years to receive random and scattered revisions without deletion—that is, without any indication of the order of entries or their relationship one to another. An intimidating specimen of this sort is the earliest complete manuscript of the *Prelude*, called by de Selincourt MS A, which is the basis of the version of 1805–06. We have known all along that MS A served as the exemplar for MS B, the roughly duplicate fair copy of about the same date. But our Associate Editor, Mark Reed at North Carolina, has confirmed that MS A was in use over a span of more than thirty years, and was drawn on not just for MS B but for MS C (between 1816 and 1819) and MS D (on which Wordsworth worked between 1832 and 1839). The poet's obsessive return to his base manuscript to enter revisions on blank verso pages presents an archeological problem of exceptional difficulty. It is as though the strata uncovered on a "dig" were all tumbled together unrecognizably. Mark Reed's ingenuity in classifying and dating the strata of entries by the slope of the handwriting, the spacing of letters, and the color of the ink represents, I think, one of the great achievements of modern editorial scholarship. Following this breakthrough, he has been able to trace a series of important shifts in some of the philosophical attitudes embodied in the constantly growing *Prelude*—from 1806, to 1818, to the 1830s. His work will be presented in his forthcoming edition of the thirteen-book *Prelude* for the Cornell series.

It should by now be apparent that it is perilous to speak of "the text" of any Wordsworth poem. The "text" turns out to be a continuum, stretching over the poet's lifetime, terminated only by his descent into the grave. The editor of Wordsworth thus has a choice of many texts, some of them cleanly delineated, some disquietingly fuzzy in outline, some so shadowy and evanescent as almost to require building out of air. What is important is that the choice the editor makes determines the canon. For whole poems are lost when the final lifetime text is the one chosen, and among them are some of Wordsworth's most brilliant writings. Coleridge thought *The Ruined Cottage* "the finest poem in our language, comparing it with any of the same or similar length," and in our century no less a figure than F.R. Leavis has ratified Coleridge's taste, categorically pronouncing *The Ruined Cottage* to be

Wordsworth's best poem. The earliest version of *The Ruined Cottage* was lost until about a dozen years ago, and we have not yet even seen, for example (though we shall in the forthcoming Cornell edition of *Poems in Two Volumes*, edited by Jared Curtis), the simple and powerful elegiac sequence that Wordsworth wrote for his brother John (it has been described in archeological metaphor as "a buried masterpiece"), nor the full original versions of the beautiful "Matthew" elegies, written at the same time as the more celebrated "Lucy" poems.

Our choice in the Cornell Wordsworth edition, which will run to twenty volumes (six are now published, six more are in press) is to return so far as possible to the earliest completed versions as the base texts, which we present as "Reading Texts," and from which we suspend all later readings in the form of an *apparatus criticus* (a procedure which some of you will recognize as precisely the reverse of de Selincourt's procedure). We also provide a generous (and, alas, costly) array of transcriptions of messy manuscript work, many of them accompanied by facing photographs. We favor, in short, the early Wordsworth over the late. There can be no doubt that a good deal of Wordsworth's revisionary labor improved details of his verse. We all remember the brilliant lines about the statue of Newton inserted into the *Prelude* as late as the 1830s:

with his prism and silent face
The marble index of a mind for ever
Voyaging through strange seas of Thought, alone.

There are many other such flashes. But they are the exception, not the rule, and our strategy is supported by Wordsworth's own poignant testimony, elsewhere in the later versions of the *Prelude*:

The days gone by
Return upon me almost from the dawn
Of life; the hiding-places of man's power
Open; I would approach them, but they close.
I see by glimpses now; when age comes on
May scarcely see at all . . .

The strategy of Wordsworth's earlier editors—their evasion, let us say, of their archeological responsibilities—while it remains admirably faithful to what we call "the poet's final intention," has,

I suggest, done Wordsworth no service, and no service to his readers. For it has meant that the Wordsworth you read, the Wordsworth we have all read, is, whatever his mature virtues, the ageing Tory humanist—not the revolutionary youthful Romantic, not the agonized young lover, not the Wordsworth Coleridge instantly recognized as the greatest philosophical poet since Milton, not the voyager into what Keats called the “dark passages” of the human heart, not the solitary recluse with a tragic vision of life. All these Wordsworths stand now in the shadow of the Victorian laureate, who learned to speak in orthodox cadences the languages of orthodox piety, to mute the passion and the pathos of his youthful verse.

It is, I think, a mark of the degree to which we have lost sight of this passion, and pathos, and misjudged Wordsworth, that we were surprised by the intensity of his love letters, discovered only six years ago. The discovery of these letters is a story that any collector can relish—and wince at! A youthful carpet-fitter in the border city of Carlisle, England, having lately taken up a new life as a part-time dealer in postage stamps, claimed to have found them in a burlap sack stuffed with old papers brought to his door one afternoon by someone (he can't manage even now to recollect who it was) to whom he paid five pounds. He put the sack away for several months in a shed at the bottom of his garden, then one day (this was in 1977) took it out and began clipping stamps off the envelopes and burning the waste paper. As he clipped away he noticed the name Wordsworth on some of the envelopes, and the name seemed vaguely familiar, as though he had heard it somewhere. Since he had no reader's ticket to the local public library, he asked a friend who had one to stop round there and see if there hadn't been a Wordsworth that he should know about. The friend looked him up, and discovered that there was indeed a Wordsworth, and the two young men telephoned Sotheby's in London, who advised them not to burn any more papers and sent a man up to have a look.

In the sack was a mixed lot of miscellaneous family records and papers, along with Mary Wordsworth's most treasured possessions—a lock of her daughter's hair cut off at death, Coleridge's will, a copy of the *Dejection Ode* written to her sister Sara Hutchinson, and copied out in her hand, along with twelve of Wordsworth's verse manuscripts and nearly a hundred letters, hitherto completely unknown. All this material went through a

minor series of further misadventures: put up at auction, it was bought by Cornell University principally to keep it together, then declared by the British to be a national treasure which could not be exported; Cornell resold it at the purchase price to the Dove Cottage Trust, and it now rests where it belongs, at Grasmere, with the poet's manuscripts and other papers.

Stuffed into this miscellaneous collection, among Mary's treasures, were thirty-one long, beautiful letters that passed between Wordsworth and his wife, some ten to twelve years after their marriage, during their first lengthy separation from each other. These are, to our astonishment, passionate letters—not, quite, perhaps, like Joyce's to Nora Barnacle, but intense, erotic, intimate, and as moving in their way as, say, Keats's letters to Fanny Brawne. If we can shake off our disappointment that they are only written to his wife, we can recognize here some of the intensity and fire which Wordsworth buried under the hardening crust of middle and old age. As their editor Beth Darlington remarks, "The correspondence pulsates not only with the steady rhythm of a deep and mutual love and trust, but also with the overwhelming elation of discovering for the first time the excitement of writing and receiving passionate letters." Here is a specimen (I quote from Beth Darlington's Cornell Press edition of *The Love Letters of William and Mary Wordsworth*, 1981):

I came in last night wet and read both the Letters in bed. Thine was the tenderest & fondest of all I have yet received from thee, and my longing to have thee in my arms was so great, and the feelings of my heart so delicious, that my whole frame was over powered with Love & longing. Well was it for me that I was stretched upon my bed, for I think I could scarcely have stood upon my feet from excess of happiness & depth of affection. I lay awake a long time longer than I have ever done except the first night since I came to London, partly from over exertion in the course of the day, and still more from the recurrence of those thoughts & wishes which used to keep sleep from me at Grasmere, in times when our hearts were in that sympathy which experience has found to be neither illusory or transient, but which every year has strengthened and exalted. (pp. 210, 212)

Or, from another letter, an even more touching specimen:

Oh my beloved—but I ought not to trust myself to this senseless & visible sheet of paper; speak for me to thyself, find the evidence of what is passing within me in *thy* heart, in thy mind, in thy steps as they touch the green grass, in thy limbs as they are stretched upon the soft earth; in thy own involuntary sighs & ejaculations, in the trembling of thy hands, in the tottering of thy knees, in the blessings which thy lips pronounce, find it in thy lips themselves, & such kisses as I often give to the empty air, and in the aching of thy bosom, and let a voice speak for me in everything within thee & without thee. . . . Oh what an age seems it till we shall be again together under the shade of the green trees, by the rippling of the waters, and in that hour— which thou lovest the most the silence the vacancy & the impenetrable gloom of night. Happy Chamber that has been so enriched with the sweet prayers of thy pure bosom; with what gratitude shall I behold it! Ah Mary I must turn my pen from this course. (pp. 229-30)

I would submit that the intensity, the passion, the tenderness, the depth of feeling revealed in these marvellous letters, together with the brilliant qualities revealed in the great early versions of the poems now slowly coming into full view, characterize the real Wordsworth, the early Wordsworth, generally the best Wordsworth, who has stood too long in the shadow of the Victorian sage—or, to return to my original metaphor, has too long lain buried underneath the crusted layers of revision that make up the poet's final text. Hence I hope it will be clear why we take it as the mission of this generation of the poet's editors to assume, rather painfully, and somewhat to our own surprise, the identities of archeologists. In this mission we remain, as always, deeply mindful of the zeal and the assiduity of book collectors like Hugh Peal, who make our labor possible, and help to validate our own fanaticism.

*This paper was presented at the Seminar on the Early English Romantics, 15 October 1982, on the occasion of the dedication of the W. Hugh Peal Collection at the University of Kentucky.